

Cottonwood Creek, CA By Don Vachini

One of my favorite backcountry escapes for wild trout flows through the westernmost edge of Yosemite National Park. Here, the Middle Tuolumne River and its major tributary, Cottonwood Creek, drain a nearly inaccessible area south of Hetch Hetchy Reservoir and northwest of Tioga Road. Accessible only via bipedal locomotion and drawing very little attention, these pristine midelevation streams hold abundant brook trout, with rainbows and browns in lesser numbers.

Gathering snowmelt, Cottonwood rolls softly down the cheeks of 7,751-foot Smith Peak. The stream then slowly snakes through verdant Cottonwood Meadows before cascading gently downhill through thickening timber to ease into the lengthy Middle Tuolumne after a 4.5-mile run. This river joins the South Fork Tuolumne outside the park, eventually merging into the main Tuolumne River farther down the canyon.

In 2013, the devastating Rim Fire scorched over 257,000 acres in and around Stanislaus National Forest before it was contained. Of this total, 78,895 acres were within Yosemite, including a swath near Cottonwood Creek. Curious as to Cottonwood's status, I, along with my son, Jason, revisited the locale during late May 2015. From the Hetch Hetchy Entrance Station near the end of paved Evergreen Road, we followed 3 miles of trail downhill to Cottonwood Meadows before scrambling to greet the stream. Most of the burn area was rich with regenerating groundcover, and the riparian vegetation showed no sign of recent human visitors.

However, evaluating Cottonwood's fishery was our main objective. Three to 6 feet wide, ice cold, and glass clear, the stream's open meadow sections coursed against undercut banks. Normal rules here include crawling, sitting, and kneeling while utilizing short-line presentations. Our flies barely cleared overhanging grass before being ambushed by zealous 8- to 9-inch brookies. Below these meadows, heavy brush and dense willows shielded gravel-bottom channels. Here we dapped dry flies, which were attacked soon after touching the water.

Near Cottonwood Creek's juncture with the Middle Tuolumne, the terrain steepens; fir, Jeffrey pine, and cottonwoods thicken; and a moderate gradient creates better-defined pools, pockets, and other scaled-down structure. Healthy mayfly, caddisfly, and terrestrial-insect populations provide a solid food base for the fish throughout the system.

Downstream on the Middle Tuolumne, still more creek than river, you need to bushwhack to reach the water. Rainbows and a few scattered browns approaching 11 inches now enter the catch. Rattlesnakes also share this space, so use appropriate caution.

Throughout most of the drainage, long casts are disadvantageous, if not impossible; well-concealed anglers will find a 7-foot, 3-weight rod with a floating line and gossamer leaders perfect for presenting size 14 to 18 dry flies, such as the Black Ant, Mosquito, and Elk Hair Caddis.

While Cottonwood is open from the last Saturday in April through November 15, its flows are more consistent throughout the early season. The Middle Tuolumne sustains a greater volume longer into the year. To reach the creek, follow State Route 120 east from Groveland for 28 miles, then turn left onto Evergreen Road, which provides two approaches to the creek. Both involve a steep climb and a downhill descent; one occurs at the beginning of the trip, the other, at the end. The first access is by way of the Hetch Hetchy Entrance, which is easy driving. The second option requires driving a high-clearance vehicle. After a right turn off Evergreen, follow Forest Road 1S25 for approximately 5 miles, then bear left onto the FR 1S25C spur for approximately a mile to its terminus. A 2-mile uphill scramble along the Middle Tuolumne follows. Visit www.nps.gov/yose for specific information, or ask for details and current conditions at the Yosemite entrance station. The U.S. Geological Survey 15-minute Hetch Hetchy Reservoir and Lake Eleanor topographic maps reveal greater trail detail. Visitors should carry plenty of water or a water filtration system.

Idyllic Cottonwood Creek definitely requires a hefty dose of sweat equity. However, a strong sense of wilderness, enhanced endorphins, and thriving wild trout make it well worth the effort.

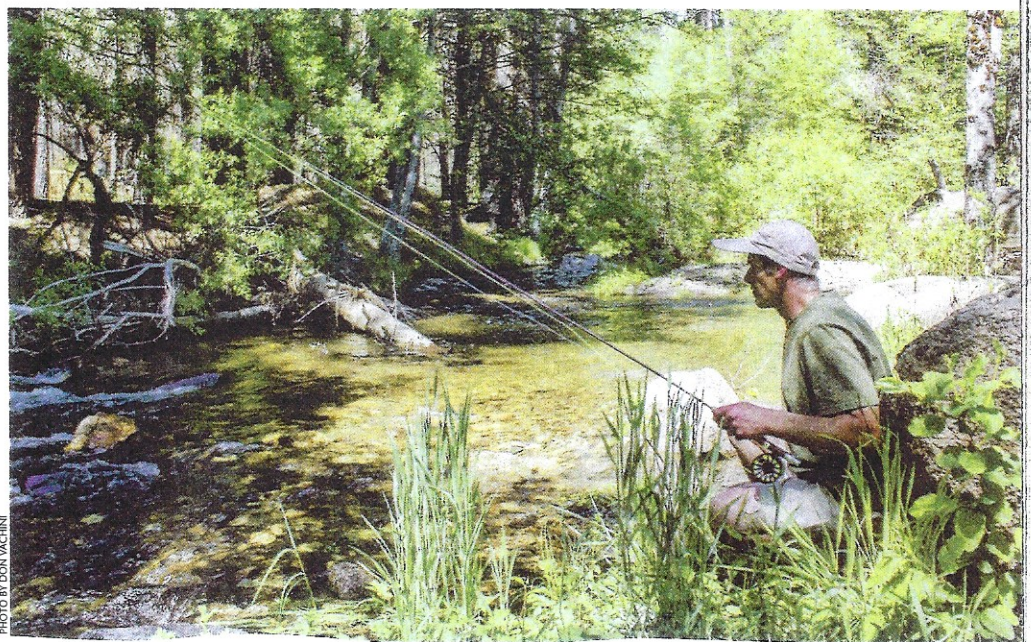


PHOTO BY DON VACHINI